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A BAPTIST MAN OF SCIENCE

The reference to William Jones (1675-1749) in Stephen Copson's 'Renewing Associations' in this issue, draws attention to an overlooked Baptist. Jones first appears in Baptist history as Wantage Baptist Church's Messenger to the meeting of the Abingdon Association in 1707. Six years later he was called from the membership to become the fourth minister of that Church, serving from 1713 to 1737. He appears in the history of science as a distinguished mathematician.[1] The scientific historians seem to have missed his Baptist links completely: Baptist writers have noted disparagingly that he had some scientific eminence.

Even his own church seems not to have understood his role in the wider world: a history of the church published about 1900 quotes earlier church records which report Jones being called to preach and then add 'he certainly was a learned man, but gave way to the study of the Longitudes, in which study he made a considerable figure, as is reported, but to the great damage of his ministerial abilities, the hurt of his temporal circumstances and the great damage of the Church'.[2] W.T. Whitley, writing about the Abingdon Association in 1926[3], said his information came from the historian, Josiah Thompson, who had added 'the curious note that at Wantage there was a minister in 1713, William Jones, under whom that church declined because he tried to discover the Longitude'. A more recent history of the church is more muted in its criticism.[4] It refers to Jones's interest in the contemporary problem of finding longitude at sea and quotes another early comment 'From a too ardent study of the earthly longitude he seemed to have got out of his spiritual latitude'. The account concludes, however, that Jones had 'an honourable pastorate of 23 years'. 'Mr Jones was evidently during his ministry held in high esteem by the cultured inhabitants of Wantage, and much respected for his scholarship and intellectual gifts; and although a large number of the more affluent members of the community died during his pastorate, the church maintained its position, being replenished by others of similar station in life.'[5] The Church Book contains a lengthy statement of Faith and Order, mainly based on Jones's writings.[6] Although he eventually gave up the pastorate, he continued to live in the town until his death.

Who was this man who was counted among the leading scientists of his day, and pastored the Wantage Baptist Church for nearly a quarter of a century?

William Jones was born in Llanfihangel, Anglesey, the son of a small farmer.[7] He had a good education, showing a bias towards mathematics. He entered a merchant's counting house in London and in this service visited the West Indies. He taught maths on board a man-of-war. Returning to London in 1702 he published *The New Compendium of the Whole Art of Navigation*, a text book of mathematics for navigators. In 1706 he published *Synopsis Palmariorum Mathesos*, or *A New Introduction to Mathematics*, a three-hundred-page 'masterly abstract of all that had been done in mathematical analysis'. It has a long section on arithmetic, including such things as compound interest calculations, and the basic geometry of conic

sections. This book attracted the attention of Isaac Newton and Edmund Halley (of Halley's comet). Jones became a life-long friend of both men, and he edited, with Newton's approval, one of Newton's books.[8] The *Synopsis* uses the Greek letter π for the ratio of the circumference to the diameter of a circle, and is the first book to do so.

Jones taught mathematics at the private school in Bethnal Green kept by Samuel Morland, a strict dissenter and sound classical scholar. One pupil was Philip Yorke (1690-1764) who later trained as a lawyer and became Lord Chief Justice of England. Later as first Earl of Hardwicke he became Lord Chancellor and greatly influenced the development of the English legal system. Meanwhile Jones became tutor to George, son of Thomas Parker, the first Earl of Macclesfield and a friend of George I. The father also attended Jones's lessons. Like Yorke later, Thomas Parker became Chief Justice and Lord Chancellor. In a colourful career, which ended with impeachment, Macclesfield showed some sympathy for dissenters and apparently supported the Quakers' Affirmation Bill although it was strongly opposed by the Bishops. George Parker became an astronomer and President of the Royal Society. The Parker family lived at Shirburn Castle, Tatsworth, Oxfordshire, and Jones lived there as part of the family for some years. George built an astronomical observatory at Shirburn.

Jones's connection with the church nearly twenty miles away, probably began while he was living at Shirburn although in later years he lived in Wantage. The Wantage church had been drawing hearers from a wide area during the sixty-year ministry of Robert Keate, who died in 1709. One of the 'persons of prominence and position' who came was Robert Styles, an Amsterdam bulb merchant who had settled in the town, built almshouses, and given the Baptists money to buy a barn, a burial ground, and a farm to be used for the support of the minister.

The interest in mathematics and astronomy and the experience of sailing the Atlantic no doubt contributed to Jones's interest in the problem of longitude. Although sailors could easily determine their latitude (for example by observing the height of the sun at midday) they had no way of determining longitude except by attempting to measure the distance travelled east or west across the oceans. An Act of Parliament of 1713 offered a reward for solving the problem, though more than twenty years elapsed before John Harrison developed his chronometer which could be taken on board ship and maintain accurate time over a long period. Jones was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1711[9] and by 1739 was one of the ten scientific members of the Society's Council. The others were three astronomers, three physicians, two botanists, a mathematician and an instrument maker.[10]

Although he never returned to live in Wales he provided two maps, 'a gift of William Jones, F.R.S., to the Welsh people', which were included in Richard Morris' edition of the Welsh Bible in 1746.[11]

William Jones married late in life. His wife, Maria, was the daughter of George Nix, a London cabinet maker whose work rivalled Chippendale's. They had a

daughter and two sons. The younger son, later Sir William Jones, who was born in 1746, went to Oxford and became a distinguished Oriental scholar and the first Englishman to master Sanskrit, but earned his living as a barrister.[12]

NOTES

Acknowledgement: Several people helped to produce this note quickly when the subject arose, and I thank the library staff of the Royal Society, Susan Mills of the Angus Library, and several members of BHS who willingly checked their shelves and supplied information.

1 *DNB*, Article Jones, William, which makes no mention of his Baptist connections. (The *DNB* entries for several of the other people mentioned in this note have also been consulted).
2 Anon, *Baptist Church, Wantage: Its Rise and Progress, 1649-1899*, n.d., pp.22-23. Ernest Payne quoted the same passage in his *Baptists of Berkshire*, 1951.
3 *BQ*, vol.3, p.44.
4 Anon, *A historical survey of the Baptist Church in Wantage*, n.d., (but the latest events in the book are dated 1949), p.14.
5 *Baptist Church, Wantage* op.cit., p.23.
6 Payne, op.cit., p.67.
7 DNB, articles Jones, William, Yorke, Philip, and Parker, Thomas.
8 *Analysis per Quantitatum Series, Fluxiones ac Differentias cum Enumeratione Linearum Terti Ordinis*, 1711.
9 Information from the Royal Society Archives.
10 H.G. Lyons, 'Two Hundred Years Ago: 1739', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society*, 1939, vol.2, pp.34-42.
11 'William Jones' in *The Dictionary of Welsh Biography down to 1940*, 1959.
12 *DNB*, Jones, Sir William.

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BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY - BAPTIST ASSEMBLY MEETING
Saturday, 29 April 2000, 3.45-4.45 p.m.
In The Foyer, Ballard Activity Centre, Plymouth.

'Maintenance to Mission: continuity and change for listed buildings'

Speakers: Revd Dr Roger Hayden, President of the Baptist Historical Society, Mr Peter Stockwell, Moderator, Listed Buildings Advisory Committee, BUGB.

BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING AND LECTURES
Saturday, 13 May 2000
Bristol Baptist College, The Promenade, Clifton Down, Bristol

'Baptists, Human Rights and Religious Liberty'

Speakers: Revd Dr Roger Hayden (President, BHS)
Professor Malcolm Evans (University of Bristol).
Booking required